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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 OTTAWA 000303

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SUBJECT: CANADA'S PARLIAMENT DEBATES AFGHANISTAN MISSION

REF: A. OTTAWA 280

[1](#)B. OTTAWA 270

[1](#)C. OTTAWA 221

Classified By: PolMinCouns Scott Bellard, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Parliamentary debate on the future of the Afghan mission has reflected a new consensus between the Conservatives and Liberals to extend the mission until 2011, as long as there are additional troops and support. The government has voiced optimism about finding 1,000 more troops from other NATO partners, and has increased its assistance to Afghanistan by another \$100 million. A House of Commons committee will hold hearings in March on the Afghan mission, with former Deputy Prime Minister John Manley appearing on March 11. The likely date for a vote now appears to be March 31. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) Canada's House of Commons on February 25 kicked off debate on the future of the Canadian Forces' mission in Afghanistan after February 2009 with the introduction of a revised Conservative motion (reftels) that would keep the troops in Kandahar until 2011, contingent upon NATO partner(s) providing an additional 1,000 troops for the province as well as ensuring sufficient helicopter and UAV capacity. Defence Minister Peter MacKay spoke on behalf of the government, praising the Liberals for "bringing forward consensus at a critical time that can result in a truly Canadian position." He expressed appreciation that "we appear ready to rise above the rancour and personal sniping, and put forward a message to Canadians, Afghans, and those around the world who are watching this debate -- including the Taliban -- that we are united." He admitted that "the road ahead may be difficult, but stability in Afghanistan is achievable. We must persevere, for the consequences of abandoning Afghanistan are grave." Liberal leader Stephane Dion responded that "it is the conviction of the Liberal caucus that what Canada has been doing and what we continue to do in Afghanistan reflects the best traditions of our country" and expressed agreement with the Conservatives that "what we have now is neither a Conservative motion nor a Liberal motion. It is a Canadian motion."

[1](#)3. (U) In a media briefing on February 27, Defence Minister MacKay and Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier each expressed optimism that NATO partners will indeed provide the necessary additional support in Kandahar, including the 1,000 troops. Furthermore, as another signal of Canadian commitment to Afghanistan, the 2008 budget that the government introduced in the Commons on February 26 notably included an additional C\$100 million in assistance to Afghanistan, which will bring Canadian contributions through 2011 to approximately C\$1.3 billion. Responding to other recommendations from the Manley Panel, the government had earlier also announced formation of a new Cabinet committee on Afghanistan, as well as new

inter-agency task force within the Privy Council Office headed by Deputy Minister David Mulroney, formerly Associate Foreign Minister.

14. (C) In a meeting with PolMinCouns on February 27, Liberal Party Deputy Foreign Affairs Critic and Vice Chair of the Commons' Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs Bryon Wilfert confirmed that the Committee will hold a series of hearings in March and had agreed to invite former John Manley to testify on March 11. He noted that he had blocked an effort in February by the Conservatives to have Manley appear before a joint Foreign Affairs/National Defence Committee Qbefore a joint Foreign Affairs/National Defence Committee session to outline the Panel's recommendations, in what he admitted was retaliation for the Conservatives refusing his request to invite Manley formally to seek the Committees' views before the Panel wrote its report. Wilfert indicated that the key remaining issue for the Liberal Party was the exact necessary number of additional troops. He noted that many military experts had already suggested that 1,000 would be insufficient and that a more realistic beef-up would be perhaps as many as 5,000 troops for Kandahar alone. He commented that this would be the only possible "deal breaker" if Manley could not explain to the Committee's (or, more to the point, the Liberal Party's) satisfaction why this level would be enough. He added that Conservative Committee members will also likely call witnesses on this point, including probably to provide clarification about from which countries the troops will come. He admitted the importance of the helicopter and UAV support, but opined that this now seemed on track, as was the issue of the handling of detainees.

15. (C) Separately on February 27, Commons' Standing Committee on National Defence chairman Rick Casson (Conservative MP) confirmed to PolMinCouns that his committee

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would not hold any hearings on the Afghan motion and was satisfied to let the Foreign Affairs Committee now take the lead. He reiterated how significant it was that the consensus on the future of the mission in Kandahar had gone beyond political parties to a true "Canadian position," and commented that even those members of the New Democratic Party and Bloc Quebecois who had visited Afghanistan privately acknowledged the importance of what Canada and NATO were doing in Afghanistan -- whatever they may say in public. He emphasized that members of Parliament understood the importance in general -- and to their constituents -- of fully supporting Canadian Forces in the field. He predicted that the Commons will easily pass the motion in March and opined that the most likely date for the final vote will be March 31, just before Prime Minister Stephen Harper heads off to the NATO Bucharest Summit.

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